

## Sex selective feticide in India

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**Abstract** Regarding sex selective abortion in India, all are aware of exclusive female disadvantage. And yet few study reported sizeable selective male feticide as such. This exercise reveals that: (1) the age-old son-preference has slightly declined on the end of the twentieth century, and (2) a substantial selective male feticide are also being committed annually, of course, along with larger selective female feticide.

**Keywords** Abortion · Feticide · Fetus sex detection · Sex ratio at birth

In the Indian traditional society male domination is strongly manifested in the unholy practice of female infanticide. This country has long been containing low female to male ratio in population and this has gradually declined from 0.972 in 1901 to 0.933 in 2001. For most of the developed countries the ratio is greater than unity.

In India, female infanticide in recent decades has substantially been reduced but this progress has been counter-balanced by the commencement of induced female feticide [1] after fetus sex detection with the help of modern medical technologies since the mid-1980s. Sex selective abortion has reflected in low 0–4 age child sex ratio. The unaffected ratio in the census of 1981 was 0.978 but after sex selective feticide came into practice, the ratio dropped steadily to 0.934 in the census of 2001 and then further to 0.905 in 2003 [2]. The female feticide in 1997 is estimated by different experts and the figures vary from a low of 106 thousand [3] to half a

million [4]. But hardly any study reported a substantial male feticide after sex detection.

National level surveys show that average ideal number of children per family that parents did like to have was 2.2 sons with one daughter in 1960–61 [5] whereas in 1998–1999, over all choice of fertile women was 1.4 sons with a daughter and additionally 0.3 child of either sex per family. Only about two percent of mothers want more daughters than sons [6]. In 1992–1993 over 85 percent of women expressed their wish to have at least one son, and over 80 percent of all fertile women liked to have at least one daughter [6]. In this prevailing situation of gender preference for children, the Special Fertility and Mortality Survey 1998 [7] reveals that female to male sex ratio at birth (SRB) for second and third orders of births for parents, who already have one or two sons, were 1.102 and 1.176, respectively as displayed in the Table 1. This means that when the desire for son of the parents was fulfilled by having a son or two, they did not want more and they detected sex of the fetus of forthcoming issue to avoid having another additional son. Some parents among them got male fetuses aborted and that is why SRB increased much above the popularly believed normal value of 0.950 to abnormally high value above unity.

Normally, as seen in the late 1960s when fetus sex detection technologies were not available, SRB at any birth order did not differ widely from its average value for all births [7]. When SRB drops below 0.950 it is generally, since prenatal sex detection technologies are made available in the mid-1980s, inferred as owing to female feticide only. But in the case of abnormally high SRBs—the selective male feticide being either left unestimated [4] or not properly interpreted. All are generally aware of the fact that in sex selective abortion, it is the females only are victims. Perhaps because of this preconceived view the issue of abnormally high SRBs could not be clearly explained. For instance, as per the

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**Table 1** Sex selective abortion in India, 1997 (Figures in columns 5th to 10th are in thousand)

Order of birth	Sex of existing child	% of all birth	Sex ratio at birth	Observed births		Expected births*		Feticide*	
				M	F	M	F	M	F
1	None	28.55	0.871	4295	3767	4295	4080	0	313
2	1 M	13.49	1.102	1785	1967	2071	1967	286	0
	1 F	13.61	0.759	2149	1631	2149	2042	0	410
3	2 M	4.16	1.176	540	636	669	636	129	0
	2 F	5.07	0.719	831	597	831	789	0	193
	1 M, 1 F	8.53	0.908	1248	1132	1248	1186	0	54
≥4	...	26.59	0.912	3895	3553	3895	3700	0	147
All	...	100.00	0.899	14743	13284	15158	14400	415	1117

Abbreviations: M, male; F, female.

\*On the basis of commonly believed natural sex ratio at birth, 0.950.

Source: Reference [8].

Registrar General of India the high SRB, 1.102 is the indication of “almost no variation between the number of male and female births” (p. 11) [8]. However, when SRB rises above unity—it eventually does imply relative male feticide.

For the fourth and higher order births there will be a few parents with three or more sons. For them, it seems, SRB will be higher than that for the third order birth, that is 1.176. For the second and third orders of births to the parents already having a son or two probably did not get female fetuses aborted for the next issue. The observed SRBs (>1) are translating at 286 thousand and 129 thousand male feticide, respectively. The observed total annual births in India were about 28 million and the SRB for all births was 0.899 [5]. So, here the Table 1 shows that there were 14.74 million male and 13.28 million female births, whereas expected births were 15.16 million male and 14.40 million female (with SRB 0.950) in absence of fetus sex detection and sex selective abortion. Therefore, female feticide appears to be about 1.12 million (not half a million or less), and the male feticide 0.42 million after fetus sex detection per year. This aggregate sex selective abortion, 1.53 million, of course, was in addition to the much larger abortions committed without sex discrimination.

The data presented here reveal an unacknowledged phenomenon. In a country with predominantly male dominated traditional culture where there is an age-old wide spread preference for sons persists—it is surprisingly observed that there, now-a-days, a section of parents commit abortion of male fetuses of at least 0.42 million per year. This was plausibly towards small family with the desired child sex composition [6, 9]. During the past four decades the demand for sons has declined from 2.2 to 1.4 but that for daughter has either remained same or slightly increased by 0.3 issue

of either sex. It is worth to watch the circumstances which precipitate the indicated change—a shift of cultural practice from female infanticide to female feticide facilitated by technological advancement. And it is also interesting to note that the age-old son-preference has slightly lost its edge as evident from the marginally increased willingness expressed to accommodate more daughters than sons. Even, deprivation against sons is being observed in the families having no daughter [10].

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